Fire of Youth

By Henry James Forman

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science, free as air. But a power infinitely stronger than any inclination of his was urging his footsteps homeward. One cannot seize freedom with violence—not sheer, aimless freedom. The deep underlying purpose in life precluded that.

He turned in Trafalgar Square, not up the Strand toward his hotel, but down Whitehall toward Westminster. Crowded omnibuses were swinging up and down with their two stories of congested passengers. Pedestrians were hurrying homeward after their day's work. What was he doing among them? The little that he accomplished for Grace Thomas was his only excuse for being here. He was in reality an idler. He walked gravely past the Horse Guards and saw the two silent watchers in their glittering panoplies on their jet-black chargers like statues in the haze. With a pang it came home to him that he had seen nothing of England, nothing even of London. How he had dreamed of London, of the delight and luxury of it, of the joy of novelty, new scenes, an older civilization, brilliant people, treasures of art, men and women and wonders! Resplendent dreams! And this was his reality. Wasted—ah, that is what Jim Howard had said. If he dwelt long enough on Vilma she would yet succeed in wasting his life. He glanced again at the statuesque figures on the raven chargers.

"Some day—you fellows—I'll see you again—but not like this." What he meant was that he would look upon them with a more cheerful heart.

The Houses of Parliament faced him and Westminster Abbey. He had not been inside any of them. It was useless. He was not in the mood for sightseeing or curiosity. The nature of his errand colored everything. The holiday spirit was lacking—the holiday spirit that had permeated even his daily life before he had met Vilma had been taken from him as might have been a gift from an unworthy recipient or a chevron from a soldier in disgrace.

Lights began to show in the windows of the Parliament houses. He walked to the middle of Westminster Bridge and stood leaning over the parapet. The dark current of the Thames flowed peacefully beneath him, with a barge here and there drifting slowly. The haze of dusk overhung the scene like a tutelary deity brooding on the face of the waters. The lights of Westminster were blinking mysteriously and a sense of grandeur and power and beauty overcame him. The world was full of lofty enterprise and noble prospects. He was filled with a longing to rise above his passions and preoccupations of the last few months, of the last few weeks, to change the entire texture of his life. If only he could live his life over! Then it seemed as though a voice were saying to him—you make your own heaven and your own hell. Your destiny is in your hands. It struck him that he was not yet twenty-five. The mood was passing. He suddenly found himself longing for warmth and cheer and friendliness. He turned abruptly and walked back through the less than half-mile of street that rules an empire upon which the sun never sets, and found nothing better than Joe Shelburn waiting for him. They were going to the Playhouse that night to see the inimitable Mr. Charles Hawtrey in an amusing play.

Joe had got over his sullenness. With cunning craftiness he had endeavored during the three or four days succeeding their interview to penetrate into the mystery of Anthony's other business in London. What was it that kept him riveted to one spot, engaging neither in sightseeing nor excursions? He had refused to go one Sunday to Brighton and another Sunday he declined to be one of four, two of whom were American chorus girls, with nothing more drastic in view than a day at Dorking, only an hour from London. Instead he haunted the parks on Sundays and Saturday afternoons—Hyde Park, Green Park, Kensington Gardens, and even Regent's, where the animals are.

"He came to find me—that's what he came for," Joe said to himself, and he rather admired Anthony for being so well able to disguise his object.

Anthony refused to buy stalls, both because of the expense and because he had brought no evening clothes with him. They sat in the balcony that night as usual, Anthony silent and preoccupied between the acts, thinking for the most part of something else, the while Joe was rattling on with his "old boy," "say, bo," "old sport," and his peculiar pawing gestures, recounting his experiences, triumphs, conquests even to the very precincts of the Gaiety Theatre.

"The Gaiety's where dukes and lords wait at the stage door," he explained. "But, old boy, when J. S. came among them they had to make way—just brushed 'em aside—fade away!" and he illustrated with a movement of the hands the dissolving ranks of the British peerage before that fane of Aphrodite, the London Gaiety. Suddenly he realized that Anthony was not listening to him, but sat with his gaze riveted on some object or person in the stalls below.

"What are you looking at?" He broke off following his gaze.

What Anthony was intently looking at was a head and a gown—the gown that came to Vilma from the dressmaker's that evening—that he had helped to hook and unhook. He could not see her face, but that head was Vilma's. She sat looking straight before her. The man with her was speaking, with his bold, insolent face turned toward her. She nodded her head slightly—a characteristic gesture. Her shoulders, her neck! She was wearing—no, it was not his pendant. It was a single string of pearls. A kind of shadowy twilight had settled upon the rest of the audience and darkened, excluded it. He saw only Vilma. An old, outlived ferocity leaped up in his heart, and his blood was pumping furiously. Unconsciously he had gripped the arms of his chair and held to them. He caught his breath, then gave a deep sigh and by effort of the will steadied himself and smiled faintly, a smile full of pain and sardonic bitterness.

"What you looking at?" repeated Joe, still puzzled. "Oh, I know—you're looking at that woman in black with peachy shoulders. 'Fess up!" he leered. "She's the dame that got your eye."

"I thought she was some one I knew—once," murmured Anthony. His mind was working at a white heat. She should not escape him now.

"If you did, you knew a peach," Joe responded eagerly. "She's staying at my hotel. Wish she didn't have that big Dutchman with her. I'd have got next long ago."

"I wonder if you mean the one I mean." Anthony made a great effort to speak deliberately and to conceal the tremor in his voice. "I mean the one in the fourth seat from the aisle in the sixth row—fourth from the middle aisle," he added with great distinctness.

"That's the one," drawled Joe, "sure, old boy, I see you've got an eye—not so bad—not so bad. Yep, she's in my hotel. I'll brace her yet," he ran on. "Old J. S. has got to get in some of his fine work. Brush aside, Dutchman!" he apostrophized her companion, "brush by and give your superiors a chance! Saw her in the lobby only yesterday—one peach!"

Anthony's muscles relaxed suddenly and he sat limply in his seat. So it was over. The search was done. He was successful after all. He had found her. Effort and will and perseverance—they seemed to be crowned like the virtues in a copy-book maxim. It was almost too easy. She should not escape this time. To-morrow morning early he would be in her hotel and accomplish what he had almost accomplished in Washington, what he had thus far failed in.

"What are you doing to-morrow, Joe?" he asked abruptly.

"Oh, to-morrow—busy day for J. S.," the other replied importantly. "Got to be in the city at ten o'clock—talk stocks and high finance. Engaged for lunch, too. Why, did you want to do anything?"

"Only if you were free," was the reply. But inwardly Anthony was saying, "At ten o'clock I shall be at the Piccadilly Hotel, with this fellow out of the way." And as all things were shaping a course favorable to him, he even dared to hope in his heart that Vilma's Austrian would be absent also.

They had supper at the Carlton grill after the theatre, and Anthony was conscious of scarcely a coherent word of Joe's incessant chatter. It might have been a soliloquy. After having given her up, Anthony was now expecting to meet her at every turn. He peered into every woman's face and nervously glanced at each new arrival. But none of the beautiful women in that ambrosial room was Vilma. The astute Italian nobleman who presides over that famous and high-priced cellar at the Carlton began to look at him with something like suspicion. But Vilma did not appear among the guests that evening.

The following morning, at precisely ten o'clock, found Anthony at the Piccadilly Hotel. A massive and magnificent head porter, the true aristocracy of Britain, adorned with broadcloth and gold lace, greeted him suavely.

"I wish to see," said Anthony, with an effort at ease, "Mrs. von Prater—Sigmund von Prater."

"Ah—number forty-two," he said. "Von Prater—just so, sir. But very sorry. They've left—less than an hour ago. Gone to the Continent, sir."

A tremor passed through Anthony's entire body, and the porter noted his sudden pallor. He leaned with one hand against the back of a chair and made a brave effort to smile.

"Too bad," he murmured.

"Very sorry indeed, sir," said the porter.

A feeling very like awe pervaded Anthony as he turned and walked out into narrow and noisy Piccadilly, cursing himself for a fool. He walked as one partially blinded from excess of light after darkness.

He felt himself brushed by the very presence of Fate.

Yet a wild hope throbbing in his heart told him that the loss of the pendant was too irreparable, too damaging and unthinkable to happen—that somewhere, sometime, finally, he would—he must recover it.

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Two days later, on the Saturday, Joe Shelburn, who was to meet him at Euston Station, failed to appear. But Anthony concluded that Joe had managed to lodge somewhere on the long boat-train before its departure. He also failed to see him at the landing stage in Liverpool, nor could he discern him in the long line of passengers boarding the Carmania. Was this to be another failure? He had counted upon bringing Joe back for Grace Thomas's sake, and Joe had absolutely promised to come. Had Joe at the last moment evaded him? On board the ship, on a table in the dining saloon, where a steward was sorting mail, he found a telegram addressed to himself. It read:

"Regret delayed. Cannot sail to-day. But coming soon. Will write. JOE."

To Be Continued Next Sunday.